

## Questions and Answers

### Owyhee Complex Wild Horse Gather

### October 2012

#### **Why is the BLM gathering wild horses from these Herd Management Areas?**

The Owyhee Complex Wild Horse Gather is being conducted to remove excess wild horses that are at risk of death if they remain on the range and to conduct fertility control on animals being released back into the range in an effort to achieve and maintain appropriate management levels. The helicopter gather is necessary to prevent a further decline in animal condition caused by minimal forage growth and reduced water availability due to severe drought conditions and to alleviate stress on the limited resources available for wild horses, livestock and wildlife.

<b>HMA</b>	<b>AML</b>	<b>Current Population<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Number to be removed</b>
Owyhee	139-231	186	47
Little Owyhee	194-298	1,097	800
Snowstorm Mountains	80-140	537	0
Rock Creek	150-250	424	0
Little Humboldt	48-80	26	0

<sup>1</sup>Based on a September 2012 inventory

The affected parts of the HMAs are within the Little Owyhee, Owyhee, Bullhead, Little Humboldt, Spanish Ranch and Squaw Valley Allotments. All of these allotments consist of various pastures that are grazed seasonally following established grazing systems; however, the season of use may vary (by one to two weeks) annually based upon forage availability, drought conditions and other management criteria. Based on escalating drought conditions, all permittees in the Elko and Winnemucca Districts have been notified this is a drought year and they should prepare for temporary changes to their grazing use. Permittees have been asked to continue to observe conditions and speak with their Rangeland Management Specialist on a regular basis to help mitigate the effects of drought. Many of the permittees that have allotments within the Owyhee Complex are aware of the current situation and have been voluntarily making livestock adjustments throughout the 2012 grazing year.

#### **What is the phased-in approach to this gather?**

The phased-in approach means leaving more wild horses on the ground in the short term, it allows for removal of excess wild horses in those areas where overpopulation pressures and impacts are greatest, and allows for a more comprehensive approach to management by using a longer-term perspective. This management strategy provides a greater opportunity to decrease the annual growth rate and reduce the necessity for, and frequency of, future gathers through the phased-in gather approach for removing excess wild horses and applying fertility control treatments over the next 10 years. Additionally, this approach was chosen due to funding and holding space limitations. Removal of excess wild horses in the initial gather will target those areas hardest hit by drought conditions where the health of the wild horses may already be compromised. Based on site visits in October 2012, these areas are primarily in the south end of the Little Owyhee HMA due to severe drought conditions.

**When did the BLM last gather in these HMAs?**

The last gather within the Owyhee Complex occurred in the summer of 2010 when 1,065 excess wild horses were removed from the range in and around the HMAs managed by the TFO. During this gather a total of 1,224 wild horses were captured, 65 mares were treated with a two-year PZP fertility control agent and returned to the HMA, 61 stallions were also released. Five branded horses were turned over to the State of Nevada and 28 died or were euthanized due to both non-gather and gather related injuries.

The last gather within the HRFO managed HMAs occurred in 2006 in the Snowstorms Mountains HMA due to the Winters Fire Emergency. During this gather 43 wild horses were gathered; 24 wild horses were removed; 14 mares were treated with PZP-22 and released; one stud was released; and four wild horses died or were euthanized. The last gather within the Little Owyhee HMA occurred in 2004 when 465 excess wild horses were removed from the range, 63 mares were treated with PZP-22 and released, and 35 studs were released back to the HMA.

**Why is the BLM gathering these HMAs as a complex?**

The five HMAs are geographically co-located with known movement of horses between and within them. The composing of the Complex allows for better management and coordination of the gather.

**What happened during the 2010 Tuscarora Gather where a number of wild horses died?**

During the 2010 Tuscarora Gather, a number of wild horses died due to water toxicity after being water starved due to lack of adequate water within the HMA and being provided water without limitation in the temporary holding area. The wild horses did not exhibit signs of distress after being gathered.

There are seeps in the area that are drying up or are dry. The river access point is very narrow, steep and long because of high canyon walls. Environmental temperatures are only a minor factor for the wild horses at this time. Treatment of water starvation is providing water. Prevention of water intoxication is primarily oriented toward providing only small amounts of water initially, but this is not possible with large groups of wild horses on the range or in a corral setting. It is very difficult to identify which horses are most affected by under hydration, and the signs of water intoxication range from very subtle to sudden and obvious. Restricting access to water may create even more problems in more horses than providing free access to water.

Even with intensive nursing care, as can be provided for domestic animals, it is difficult to save affected wild horses.

Water has been hauled to several springs in the Little Owyhee HMA throughout the 2012 summer, but the extreme overpopulation of wild horses in the area prevents all wild horses from receiving adequate water.

Extreme care is taken to gather horses in the most humane way possible, but there is the distinct possibility that wild horses might succumb to water toxicity without showing any signs of distress at the gather site or temporary holding facility.

**What will be done differently from 2010 to minimize animal deaths?**

This summer, the BLM began hauling water to affected areas to alleviate the potential of dehydration among gathered wild horses. Areas were identified during pre-gather monitoring of the HMAs.

If animals being gathered are noticeably gaunt, it may be advantageous to offer an initial watering opportunity at the gather site in a timely manner while also controlling their rate of intake. However, wild horses appearing dehydrated will need to be observed closely to see that they consume water and to limit intake if they appear seriously water starved. If this is the case, it is anticipated that it will be more beneficial to stop or slow gather operations and water horses at the trap site to watch individual consumption more closely in smaller groups.

Once the horses have been sorted and separated at temporary holding, it becomes more difficult to control the rate of intake for certain animals or groups of animals. If, after sorting, an animal appears to be consuming water too quickly in too short a time frame, they may need to be separated and only offered limited quantities of water to ensure they do not drink too much and suffer from water intoxication. This could be done at either the temporary holding corrals or the gather site.

**Population Questions****What are the estimated wild horse populations for this HMA?**

A population inventory conducted in September 2012 documented 2,267 wild horses in the Owyhee Complex.

**What is the foaling season of wild horses?**

Generally wild horses foal from March through June, but could also foal year-round.

**Gather Process Questions****Where is the BLM gathering horse?**

Actual gather locations will depend on where the wild horses are located when the gather process begins. Previous gather sites may be used or new locations could be utilized. The BLM will provide the public with information on meeting places during gather operations.

**Will the BLM remove all the wild horses that are gathered?**

No. Only those areas identified as having excessive populations of wild horses will have removals. Other HMAs will have a catch, treat and release approach to achieve and maintain appropriate management levels.

**How does the BLM gather wild horses?**

Gather operations would include the use of a helicopter. All gather and handling activities would be conducted in accordance with Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) (See Appendix A of the Final EA).

### **Why does the BLM use helicopters to gather wild horses, isn't that inhumane?**

The 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act (WFRHBA) authorizes the BLM to use helicopters to gather wild horses, as well as motorized vehicles to transport gathered animals. The use of helicopters and motorized vehicles has proven to be a safe, effective, and practical means for the gather and removal of excess wild horses and burros from the range.

The mortality rate during wild horse and burro gathers is typically about one percent or less. In Fiscal Year 2011, the number of deaths occurring during gathers was 0.91 percent (99 horses died out of the 10,892 horses and burros gathered) -- that is, less than one percent of the total number captured. About one-quarter of one percent of the animals gathered (0.22 percent or 24 of the 10,892 gathered in 2011) died or were euthanized because of injuries or accidents that occurred during capture. Most of the gathered animals that need to be euthanized, however, are put down as an act of mercy because of preexisting conditions, such as limb deformities or old injuries that happened on the range. Some deaths also occur soon after horses are brought into captivity, usually associated with older horses or those that are very thin or in poor condition when gathered. Some of these already weakened horses, many of which would likely die on the range if not gathered, are examined by veterinarians and BLM staff and are euthanized if they are unlikely to improve or do not respond to treatment. Others adapt to captivity and do well after they get adequate feed and water and make their initial adjustment to domestic life.

Though the wild horses experience a heightened stress level for the short period of time that the helicopter is herding the animals towards the gather corrals, animals calm down quickly afterwards. Helicopter gathers require less than a third of the time of traditional water or horseback trapping methods.

Other methods of gathering wild horses on horseback or water trapping can be effective in small gathers and in confined spaces, but they are not nearly as efficient as helicopter gathers. Water trapping can be very effective when water resources are scarce but nearly impossible otherwise. Also, this method is very time consuming.

Using horseback riders to herd the horses into gather corrals is very difficult in large open areas of public lands. This practice is very hard on the domestic horses and the riders; both have a high likelihood of being injured. This method is very inefficient and takes an enormous amount of time to complete.

**Two reports issued in the fall of 2010 (one by four independent, credentialed equine professionals and one by the Interior Department's Office of Inspector General), plus another report released in 2011 by the American Association of Equine (Veterinary) Practitioners, found -- without any ideological or political bias -- that the BLM's gathers of wild horses are conducted in a humane manner. The Inspector General determined that the BLM's gathers are "justified" and reported that the agency "is doing its best to perform a very difficult job."**

### **Does the public have input regarding the use of helicopters and motorized vehicles in managing wild horses?**

Section 9 of the WFRHBA requires that a public hearing be held prior to the use of helicopters and motorized vehicles. A public hearing is held annually on a State-wide basis regarding the use of motorized vehicles, including helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, in the management of wild horses. During these meetings, the public is given the opportunity to present new information and to

voice any concerns regarding the use of the motorized vehicles. The Carson City District Office hosted the State-wide meeting on May, 29, 2012; the current gather operation SOPs were reviewed in response to concerns expressed and the BLM determined that no changes to the SOPs were warranted.

**Do personnel use whips to move the wild horses through the pens and chute?**

The contractor uses flags or noise-making paddles to move wild horses through the pens and chutes. The flags are usually made by attaching a plastic grocery bag to the end of a sorting stick or buggy whip. The flag prevents the stick or whip from hitting the horse with any sort of impact or sting to it. Seeing and hearing the plastic flag motivates the animal to move away from the source of the stimulus. This technique is similar to those used for domestic and wild horses being trained using resistance-free methods.

**Will water be available for the wild horses at the gather site?**

Watering horses at the gather site will be dependent upon wild horse condition when they are gathered.

If animals being gathered are noticeably gaunt, it may be advantageous to offer an initial watering opportunity at the gather site in a timely manner while also controlling their rate of intake. However, wild horses appearing dehydrated will need to be observed closely to see that they consume water and to limit intake if they appear seriously water starved. If this is the case, it is anticipated that it will be more beneficial to stop or slow gather operations and water horses at the trap site to watch individual consumption more closely in smaller groups.

Once the horses have been sorted and separated at temporary holding, it becomes more difficult to control the rate of intake for certain animals or groups of animals. If, after sorting, an animal appears to be consuming water too quickly in too short a time frame, they may need to be separated and only offered limited quantities of water to ensure they do not drink too much and suffer from water intoxication. This could be done at either the temporary holding corrals or the gather site.

**Is this an emergency action?**

No, however this has been identified as an escalating situation and wild horses may be at risk of death if they remain on the range. The helicopter gather is necessary to prevent a further decline in animal condition caused by minimal forage growth and reduced water availability due to severe drought conditions.

**What happens to the wild horses that are removed from the range?**

Wild horses removed from the range will be transported to a short-term holding facility at the National Wild Horse and Burro Center in Palomino Valley, near Reno, Nev., or the Litchfield Facility near Ridgecrest, Calif. using trucks per the SOP's attached to the EA. Animals are segregated by sex and age and loaded into separate compartments. Upon arrival at the short-term holding facility, the wild horses are off-loaded and placed into holding pens where they are provided water and hay. After some time of adjustment to the short-term holding facility, the animals are prepared for adoption. Veterinary care and preparation includes freeze-marking with a unique identification number, vaccination from common diseases, castration of studs, and deworming. Individual animals not placed into adoption are transported to long-term pastures in the Midwest.

**Will any of the wild horses be sent to slaughter?**

The BLM condemns any sale of wild horses for slaughter. We care deeply about the well-being of wild horses, both on and off the range, and the BLM does not sell and has not knowingly sold or sent horses or burros to slaughter. We take seriously all accusations of the slaughter of wild horses or burros.

**What about allegations of the BLM selling horses to a known kill-buyer?**

The Office of the Inspector General at the Department of the Interior has initiated an investigation into the situation and will work in conjunction with the State of Colorado throughout its investigation. We look forward to the results of that inquiry. Anybody that is found to have violated the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act should be held accountable.

**How does the BLM select its gather contractors?**

The BLM's national gather contracts were awarded in 2012 following an in-depth technical review of the proposals received from the prospective contractors. Among the key elements of the technical review was evaluation of the prospective contractor's knowledge, skill and ability to gather and handle wild horses and burros in a safe, effective and humane manner. The BLM's contractors have demonstrated the knowledge, skill and ability to gather and handle these animals safely, effectively and humanely.

**What contractor will be conducting the gather?**

Sun J Livestock of Vernal, Utah

**Range/Grazing Questions****Is there livestock grazing in this area?**

Based on escalating drought conditions, all permittees in the Elko and Winnemucca Districts have been notified this is a drought year and they should prepare for temporary changes to their grazing use. Permittees have been asked to continue to observe conditions and speak with their Rangeland Management Specialist on a regular basis to help mitigate the effects of drought. Many of the permittees that have allotments within the Owyhee Complex are aware of the current situation and have been voluntarily making livestock adjustments throughout the 2012 grazing year.

The Bullhead, Little Humboldt, Little Owyhee, Owyhee, Spanish Ranch, and Squaw Valley Allotments are managed for livestock grazing but portions of these allotments also overlap with HMA boundaries and those overlapping areas are consequently managed concurrently for wild horses. There are a total of seven livestock operators (permittees) currently authorized to graze livestock in these allotments annually. The total permitted use for these permittees is a combined total of 127,029 Animal Unit Months (AUMs) yearly in the 6 allotments (including on non-HMA lands). An AUM is the amount of forage needed to sustain one cow or its equivalent for one month (43 CFR 4100). All of these allotments consist of various pastures that are grazed seasonally following established grazing systems; however, the season of use may vary (by one to two weeks) annually based upon forage availability, drought conditions and other management criteria.

Allotment	HMA Acres	% of allotment overlapped by HMA	Original AUMs	2012 AUMs	Actual Use	Season of Use
Bullhead	117,109	69%	19,283	12,050	7,000	Year round/rotational
Little Humboldt	17,159	18%	7,656	8,279	6,846	4/16 – 11/30
Little Owyhee	460,227	79%	47,463	27,800	8,000	3/1 – 6/30 and 9/1 – 2/28
Owyhee	339,103	91%	30,225	29,903	N/A	3/15 – 12/15
Spanish Ranch	108,876	58%	48,997	26,796	12,367	3/25 – 10/31
Squaw Valley	12,506	5%		22,201	11,587	3/1 – 2/28

Based on BLM population surveys, the current adult wild horse population is approximately 2,267 wild horses for the Owyhee Complex. This equates to 27,224 AUMs, which is 15,217 AUMs higher than the HMA carrying capacity of 12,007 AUMs designated for wild horse use.

#### **Is the BLM removing wild horses to make room for more livestock grazing?**

No. Each Field Office is working with livestock permittees to take voluntary measures in response to drought conditions, but no formal closures have been issued. Permitted livestock grazing is one of the multiple uses within the Complex and HMA's. In some of the HMAs, the wild horse numbers exceed the AML prohibiting the allotments/HMAs from achieving a thriving natural ecological balance.

Authorized livestock grazing on BLM-managed lands has declined nearly 50 percent since the 1940's; of that authorized use, actual use has declined by 30 percent since 1971 (the time of enactment of the WFRHBA).

#### **Does the wild horse overpopulation impact wildlife and plants?**

Common wildlife species within the Complex include coyote, black-tail jackrabbit, desert cottontail, bobcat and numerous raptors, reptiles and other small mammal species. Mule deer and pronghorn antelope are common big game species in the area. Elk are common in the Rock Creek HMA and a small number of elk inhabit the Owyhee HMA primarily during the winter period near Desert Ranch Reservoir. Currently, the overabundant population of wild horses is adversely affecting valuable habitat needed to support both wildlife and wild horses.

Wild horses often graze the same area repeatedly throughout the year. Forage plants in those areas receive little rest from grazing pressure. Continuous grazing by wild horses does not allow plants sufficient time to recover from grazing impacts. Such overgrazing results in reduced plant health, vigor, reproduction, and ultimately to a loss of native forage species from natural plant communities. Over time, this greatly diminishes habitat quality as abundance and long-term production of desired plant communities is compromised. If wild horse populations are not controlled in this area, forage utilization will exceed the capacity of the range.

**What are some of the effects of wild horse overpopulation on Threatened and Endangered Species?**

Maintaining the existing wild horse over-population, which would increase with each successive foal crop, would result in continued and increasing impacts to threatened and endangered species populations and habitats. Wild horse populations would increase (about 15-25% each year that a gather is postponed). Upland habitats would continue to see locally heavy levels of utilization associated with wild horse use, which areas of heavy use would continue to expand as wild horse populations continue to grow. Continued heavy grazing would occur on spring meadow systems and creeks adversely effecting sage-grouse and Lahontan cutthroat trout habitats.

**Does wild horse overpopulation affect Greater sage-grouse and/or their habitat?**

The gather area contains approximately 1,724,522 acres of summer habitat, 963,358 acres of nesting habitat and 1,851,225 acres of winter habitat. Approximately 380,365 acres of generally important habitat for sage-grouse, known as preliminary general habitat (PGH), has been identified.

Approximately 1,318,763 acres of particularly important habitat for sage-grouse, known as preliminary priority habitat (PPH), has been identified.

There are 53 known leks within the Owyhee Complex and 141 known leks within the total gather area. A high percentage of the leks on the Rock Creek and Little Humboldt HMAs have been affected by wildfires, and intensive rehabilitation efforts have also been completed on thousands of acres. Collectively, these lek areas provide core breeding habitat for some of the highest historic sage grouse population densities in Nevada.

Wild horses are affecting sage-grouse habitat through heavy utilization of upland grasses and meadows used by sage-grouse for nesting and summer brood rearing. Maintaining the existing wild horse over-population, which would increase with each successive foal crop, would result in continued impacts to populations and habitats. Wild horse populations would increase (about 15-25% each year that a gather is postponed). Upland habitats would continue to see locally heavy levels of utilization associated with wild horse use and that use would continue to expand as wild horse populations continue to grow. The resulting decrease in herbaceous vegetation would reduce sage grouse nesting quality.

**Why don't you just make more land available to the wild horses and burros?**

Under the WFRHBA, wild horses can only be managed on areas of public lands where they were known to exist in 1971 (the time of enactment of the WFRHBA). Wild horses need to be managed in areas where there is sufficient vegetation and water to support a healthy, viable herd.

**General Gather Questions****What actions will be taken for dust abatement at the gather and temporary holding sites?**

A water tender will be available for the duration of the gather to provide dust abatement on public roads and at the gather site.

**Will gather or temporary holding sites be located on public or private lands and will the public be allowed access to private lands?**

Public lands within the HMAs will be open to the public during gather operations, subject to necessary safety restrictions. However, portions of the gather area may be located on private property and may be restricted from public access. The BLM will make every effort to allow for



public viewing opportunities, but might be at some distance when gather sites are located on private property.

**What is the BLM doing to ensure the safety of visitors during inclement weather conditions?**

Severe weather conditions could result in the cancellation of operations. Visitors are advised to check the gather hotline daily for updates. Road conditions to the gather site are mostly dirt roads and sometimes two-track uneven surfaces. Inclement weather can aggravate driving conditions and it is highly recommended visitors use 4-wheel drive, high clearance vehicles. Government vehicles cannot be used to assist personal vehicles in emergency situations; however, every effort will be made to contact emergency services for visitors if the need arises.

**Adoption Questions**

**How can I adopt one of the wild horses?**

The excess wild horses removed from the range are offered for adoption to qualified people through the BLM's Adopt a Wild Horse or Burro Program. Potential adopters must have the proper facilities and financial means to care for an adopted animal, and we always hope that they have experience working with a wild horse or burro, which will help ensure the gentling process.

During the first year, the BLM retains title to the animal(s), and will conduct compliance checks throughout the year in an effort to ensure as much as possible that the animal is properly being cared for and has gone to a good home. At the end of the first year, if the adopter has complied with all the adoption stipulations and has properly cared for their wild horse for one year, he or she is eligible to receive title, or ownership, from the federal government.

The BLM has placed nearly 225,000 wild horses and burros into private care since the adoption program began in 1971. To apply to adopt a wild horse or burro on-line, please go to the BLM's adoption website at:

[http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/whbprogram/adoption\\_program.html](http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/whbprogram/adoption_program.html)

Or call 1-800-4Mustangs with any questions about the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program.